

This survey was based upon about 1,000 questionnaires. People chose to be surveyed. It is not meant to be a quantitative, statistically valid research piece so much as a taking of the pulse of the park's users. I particularly wanted to do this as a new Superintendent as a means of learning about values from people who have been in the park for many years.

Making these results available to visitors of QuietJourney is but a small way to reply to those involved. Thanks to everyone who participated.

~ Robin Reilly, Quetico Park Superintendent

Quetico User Survey 2002

What are the values, attitudes and concerns of park users

Good customer service and park management requires knowing the people who use your park. Over the years Quetico has done surveys on how many people use the park, where they come from and whether or not they are satisfied with their trip. To do this we examine the permits or do short surveys to find out a little information on a lot of people. From this we know that approximately 80% of the park's 25,000 users come from the United States, we know they come primarily from the Midwest, that they come back often and are very supportive of the park.

In 2000/2001 we wanted to do something different. We wanted to know much more about people's values, attitudes and concerns. To do this we asked for a lot of information from a small number of people. About 1,000 people offered to be surveyed and to provide lengthy comments about their use of the park and their suggestions as to how it should be managed. This 'qualitative survey' asked a series of open-ended questions and encouraged people to write in their responses. Over 500 actually sent in replies and they provided thoughtful and helpful ideas. Of course in such a survey you are only surveying those who come to the park. The fact that they are in the park likely suggests that they have a positive attitude toward it. Others not in the park could have very different hopes, needs and expectations.

In sending out the survey I promised to prepare a summary and make it available. It's been a lot of work and if it wasn't for some of the respondents asking repeatedly when the results would be released, I might not have kept wading through the responses.

The greatest value of this research was to read and reread every single response. That was no small feat because most responses were 5-10 pages long. We've grouped and sorted the responses into a range of categories according to topic, and I reviewed these when any topic is being considered. We've also recorded some of the clearest and strongest statements and keep these distinct and unaltered. Surveys were grouped by entry station and by nationality. People were asked to draw their routes on maps and we've used a Geographic Information System (GIS) to understand where the heaviest canoe traffic goes. Finally, we tried to group and count similar responses and form these into categories so that we can provide some graphs. In this regard we have had support from Lakehead University in conducting the analysis.

Please remember when reading these graphs that people were not asked to simply check off boxes, rather they were writing offering open-ended opinion and suggestion. Subsequently we tried to group the comments into similar categories. Sometimes

people would make two somewhat conflicting comments in the same paragraph and we would count each. As a result, percentages don't often add up to 100. As well as the graphs I've added in some sample comments to give a deeper sense of the meaning behind the numbers. Finally, many questions were not brought up or responded to at all so the proportion of people listed as 'no comments' is higher than would be expected from a check-a-box style of survey.

General Observations

The strongest overall impression from reading through these surveys is how devoted people are to Quetico and how satisfied they are with the policies and operations. The survey responses don't represent all users but rather only those who choose to be surveyed and chose to respond. Perhaps this means it is a sub-set of the most positive although often people are more inclined to respond if they have a complaint. Still, I can only review what was submitted and that sample is an overwhelmingly positive one. For example:

- *The finest wilderness paddling on the planet.*
- *Quetico is my favourite place in the world thank you for allowing me to be a guest.*
- *Quetico is my favourite place on earth.*
- *Don't turn Quetico into an Algonquin*
- *Quetico's management should be a model for the BWCA.*
- *I have canoed for 45 years and enjoy Quetico because it reminds me of the wilderness I used to experience that is now gone in other places.*

As a rule I'd say that US citizens are the most passionate about the park. Perhaps Canadians feel they have more alternative parks to go, or perhaps Canadians just expect more from their own parks while American's feel that using them is a privilege. These statements capture some of this sentiment:

- *I wish Canadians loved Quetico as much as Americans do.*
- *Would love to do some volunteer work in Quetico. I love the park and am grateful for the people of Canada for sharing it with me.*
- *Have canoed Quetico 35 years in a row. I feel honored and privileged to be able to.*
- *It has always been an honor to visit Quetico.*
- *As a foreigner, entry to your park is for me, a privilege. I feel grateful for the privilege to use Quetico*
- *I moved from North Carolina to Minnesota last year, largely to be closer to Quetico.*

It was also surprising how many people said that they enjoyed and appreciated the chance to do the survey and were keen to help out any way they could. Many of those who responded sent donations along with their responses.

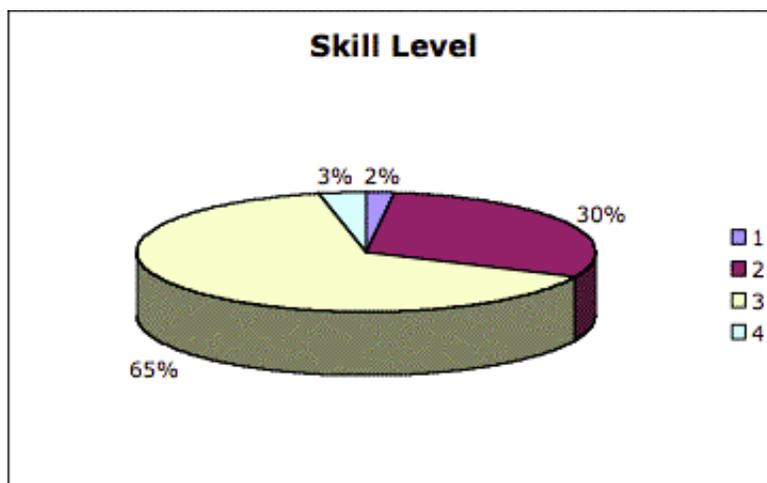
- *Thanks for the survey. They are thoughtful questions that I'm glad are being addressed.*
- *The fact that you are sending out a survey such as this type indicates you care about the future of Quetico as much as we long time users do.*
- *Thanks for this survey, I'm happy you're interested in my opinions.*

This then was the general tone. While its great to read words of praise, it is also good to probe for problems and concerns. The following section examines more specific questions in which people we encouraged to make suggestions, recommendations, criticisms and complaints.

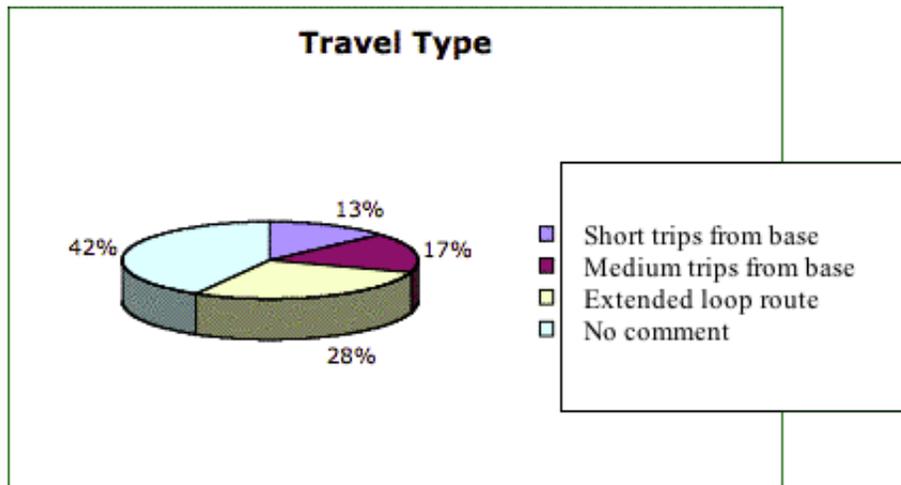
Summary of Specific Responses to Questions.

Who are we getting responses from?

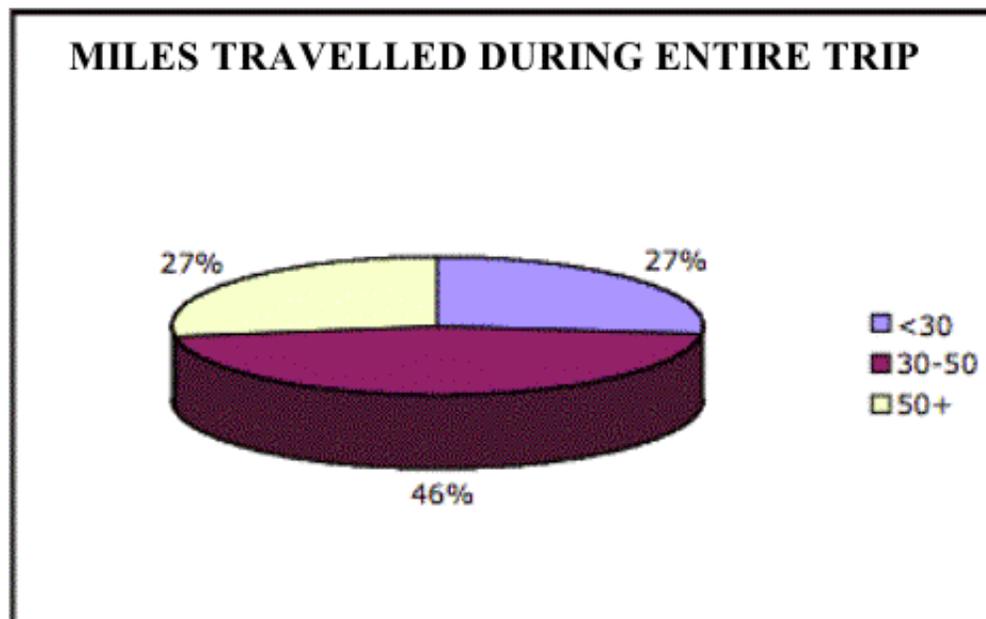
In an effort to better understand the responses we wanted to understand something about each writer. It seemed important to know whether they were skilled canoeists on repeated trips, or novices on their first outing. As we'd thought, Quetico visitors are experienced canoeists (65%), most considering themselves skilled and the almost all the rest at least moderately skilled (30%).



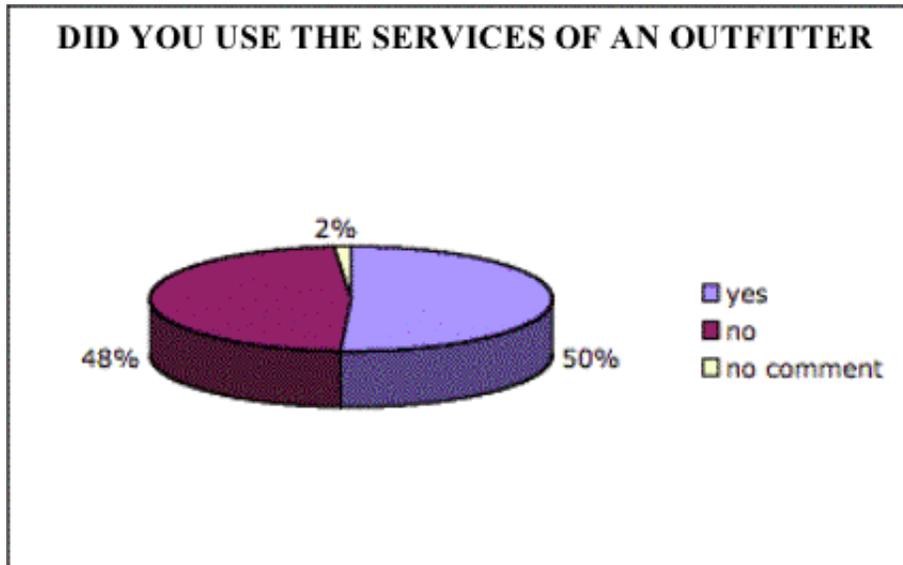
We also wanted to know whether people were traveling in an extended loop or rather base camping from a favourite spot. A lot of people did not address (42%) this question but of those that did there was an even split between those making an extended trip (and those working from a favourite spot. The number of people going to a favourite spot as a main camp seems to be higher than in previous studies. It may be consistent with a trend toward more older people and repeat paddlers using the park and being less in a rush to see as much as they can.



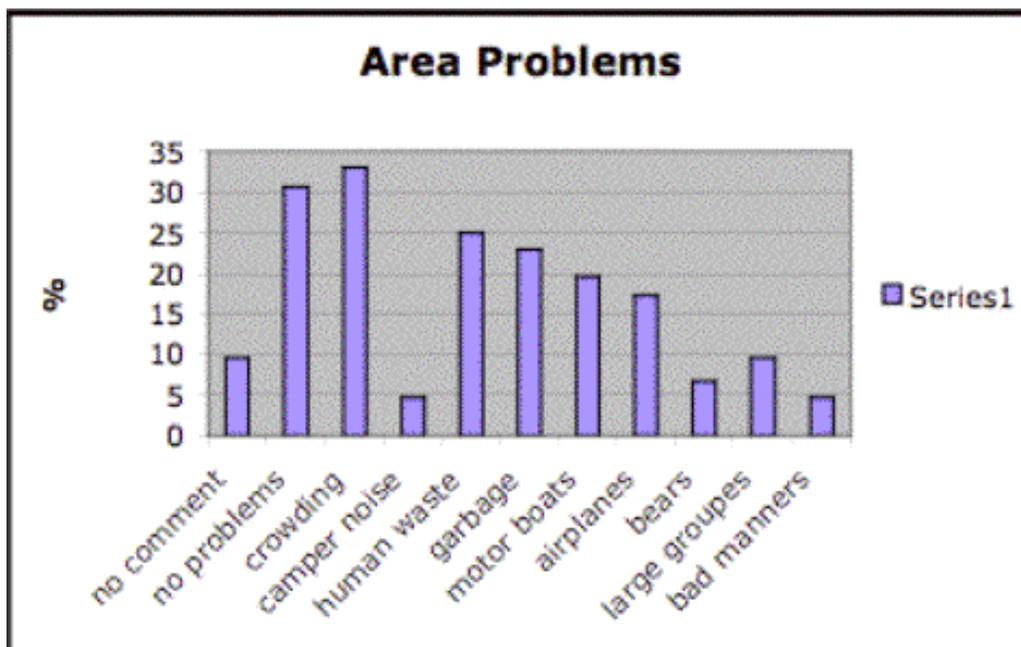
Finally, the survey also confirmed that Quetico has a strong tradition of repeat use. The strong majority of people had been in the park before and many had done more than ten trips. Trips tended to be quite long, most people traveling between 30-50 miles with almost one-quarter going more than 50 miles.



Finally, we knew that many park users come to Quetico through the services of an outfitter (included in this is also scout and youth groups). We hoped to get a sense of the proportion of outfitted trips. From this sample it seems as though half of all people coming into Quetico are having their trip arranged by an operator. This underscores the importance of having good communications with outfitters in order to reach many park users.

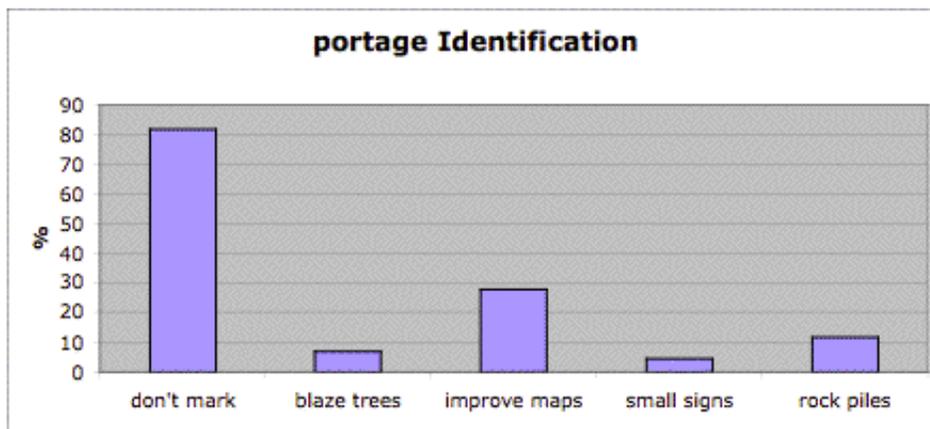


A key purpose of the survey was to learn what problems people were encountering. A number of problem areas were offered for comment. The following graph records some of these problems. From the tone of the comments these were typically more of an annoyance than a crisis. There were very few strong complaints. Rather, there was encouragement to try and reduce group size, spread use out over a longer season and possibly reduce overall numbers. Similarly, a significant number of people were concerned about encountering motorized boats and airplanes. Human waste management is something else that seemed to require some attention.



- *Our campsite on Quetico Lake just east of Eden Island seems to be on the path of float planes. Disappointed with the amount of noise. Could they alter their routes?*
- *Won't enter through Prairie again because of motors on Basswood. Nor will I paddle on the native motor use lakes.*
- *Large groups (boy scouts?) travel in flotillas and take up a bunch of campsites close together, then are noisy.*
- *Noticing heavier use on the periphery lakes than in the past. Promote campers to get at least an 8 km distance away from entry areas to avoid congestion.*
- *When the native guides were allowed motor boats we became very concerned with the repercussion in the lakes, but it seems to be minimal impact.*
- *It seems foolish to try to enjoy the wilderness feeling and have someone with excess money come motoring by with a guide. I hope that motors can be eliminated soon. I own and use an outboard motor but we do not travel 2,000 miles each year to encounter them in a wilderness park.*
- *Airplane traffic is noticeable. My single most disturbing incident occurred one very early morning on Quetico Lake. As I stood with coffee cup in hand I listened and watched in utter disbelief as a native outfitter and client motored toward my camp. I had never felt so defeated. Didn't know who to be more upset with, the guide or the client*

We asked for and received lots of suggestions regarding portages. There was strong support for our policy of not marking portage trails. Many people also bemoaned the absence of our previous map and asked that it be reprinted....(we will...starting this summer). Some thought there was merit in making a small pile of rocks near the beginning of a portage just to confirm the start at those locations where it is unclear.

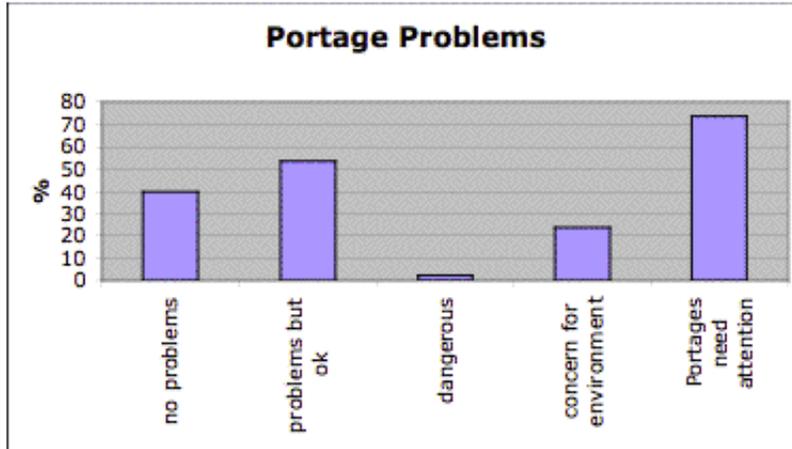


Typical comments were:

- *Marking portages with small rock piles would be OK but no signs please.*
- *What would be the point of me making the long drive to Quetico if it was 'signed'?*
- *If you need to find portages by signs, then stay home. Orienteering through these lakes is part of as rewarding experience. I come here to leave everyday life in overpopulated society behind. I am here to relax and become one with nature. Quetico is not for everyone. The experience is not to be rushed. Signage would disrupt that peace. All parks in my home state are signed, paved, and well marked, that's why I'm here in Quetico each summer.*
- *Portage signs would spoil the experience. Make the landings prominent.*
- *If you have to mark the odd portage please use only a small rock pile. No signs.*

- *Instead of marking portages how about a better park map?*

As for the condition of the portages, many people thought they needed more attention others had problems with the condition but could cope with them. A small number thought their condition presented a danger and some thought that they had deteriorated to the point of raising an environmental concern.

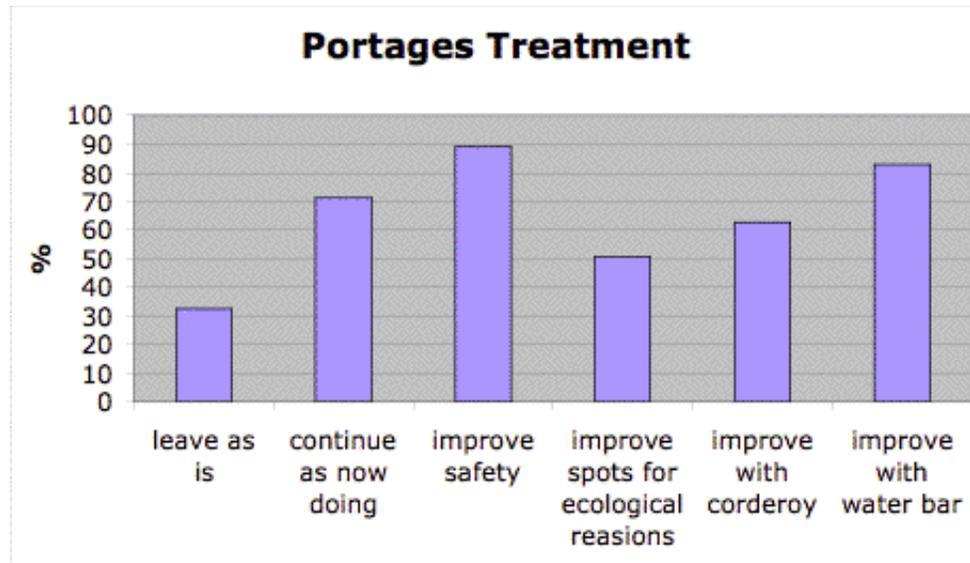


The diversity of views about what to do about portages is evident in the following:

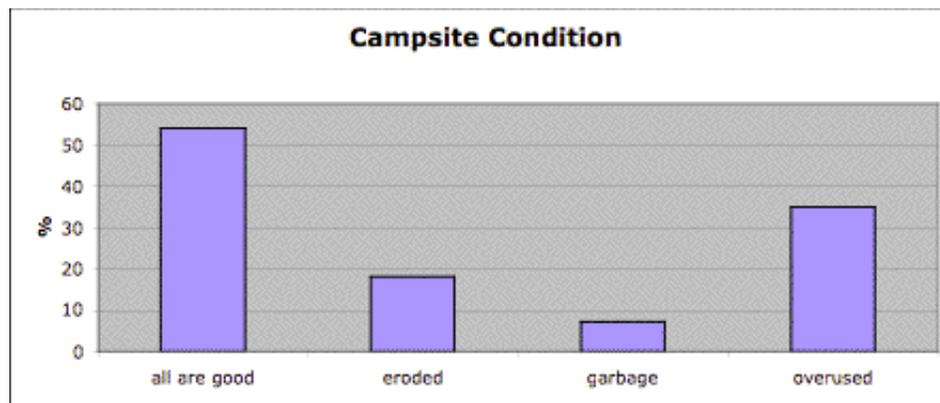
- *Leaving eroded portages the way they are causes rerouting and more erosion.*
- *Manage portages in whatever manner best preserves the ecosystem.*
- *Make sure all portage landings around waterfalls are well cleared to spot the opening immediately.*
- *That's why there's a lake at each end of a portage...to rinse the mud off your legs!*
- *A part of the experience and "bragging rights" of a canoe trip comes in the form of hard portages. Watching my wife sink into mud over her knees is still talked about!*
- *The idea that measures taken on portage erosion destroys the wilderness is nonsense. The fact that there are trails at all indicates that humans have been around.*
- *Quetico is a sensitive ecosystem and visitors have to accept some preventative measures like split logs on trails to minimize impact.*

There was a similar range of suggestions as to what we should do about portage conditions. Many people believing that our current practice was sufficient while others thought that more portage rehabilitation was in order to make them safer or less destructive to the environment (and particularly tree roots). There was a recurring observation that we don't seem to try and use rocks or logs to divert water away from the portages any more and as a result they are becoming muddy ditches.

Most comments on portages suggested a declining level of satisfaction over the last decade.



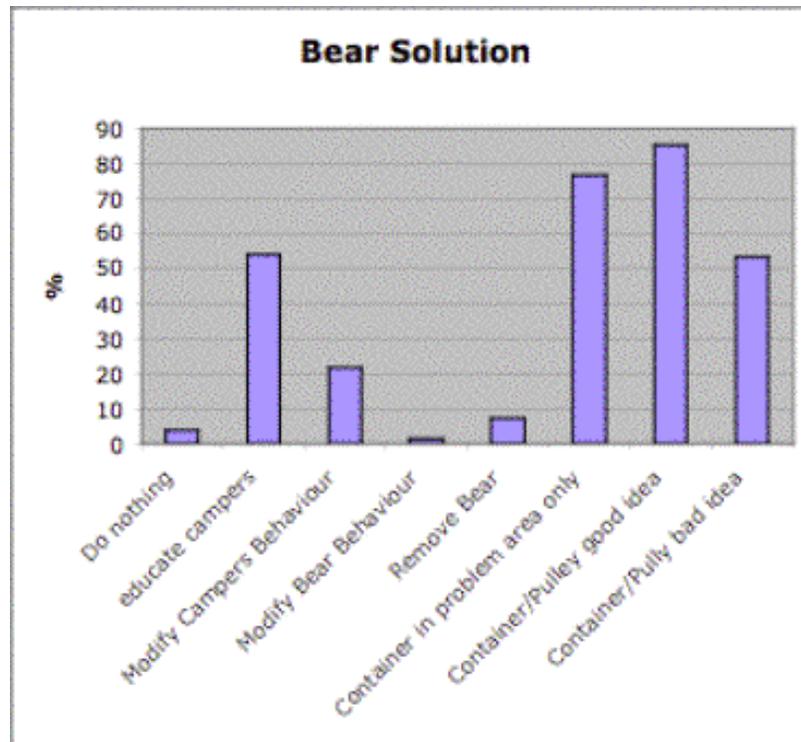
Campsites were generally found to be in good condition... perhaps better than in earlier surveys . Most people loved their sites while those that complained of problems seemed more concerned than annoyed.



The range of comments included:

- *Campsite quality and cleanliness deteriorates the closer you get to entry points.*
- *Perhaps you could use campsite mapping to rotate campsite use on a 2 or 3 year cycle to give the sites a chance to rest?*
- *I'm 68, have camped in Quetico every year since I was 15. The park is in much better shape than in 1950.*

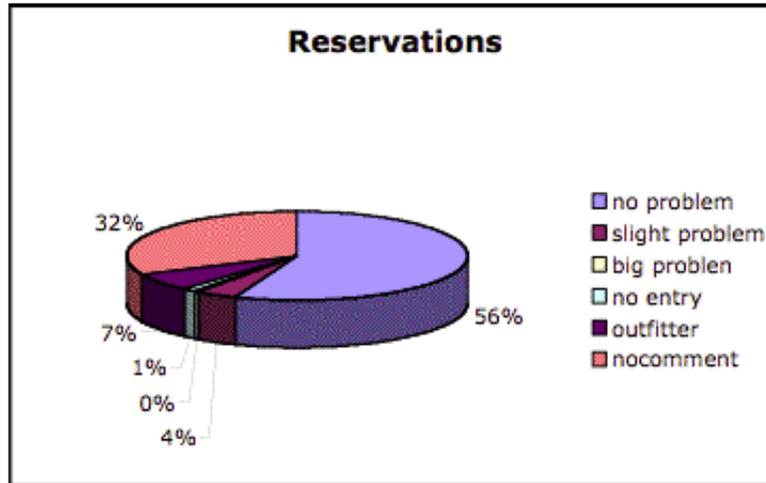
We asked people about encounters with bears. Generally, there were few encounters although there was some repeated occurrences in the north-central areas. Regardless of whether people had had encounters there were many suggestions regarding our options for bear management. Few thought we should be removing bears or negatively reinforcing their encounters with people, unless this was a last resort. A number of people recommended educating campers to reduce problems. On balance many people thought that temporarily putting in some form of bear proof food storage in problem areas was acceptable. They reasoned that this could break a habit and although they didn't like to see built items in the park (boxes, pulleys) they preferred it to shooting a problem animal. That said a significant number thought any kind of structure was a bad idea in a wilderness park. Most recognized that this was a difficult and complex issue and that the more they thought about it the less they felt sure of what to do.



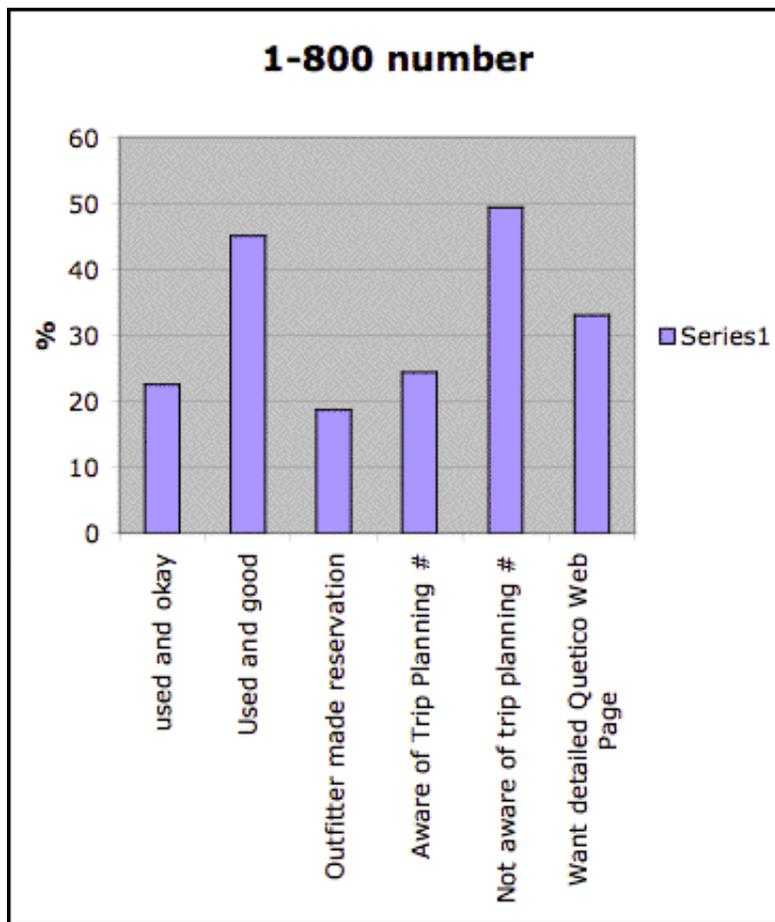
Common comments were:

- *I'm in favour of bear boxes, just a few, instead of an injured camper or a dead bear.*
- *Have had two aggressive bear encounters in the park in ten years, but are reluctant to endorse steel containers. Perhaps have them only at very heavily used portages, 5 at the most throughout the park, especially if it protects the bear.*
- *Taking away the bears doesn't seem right. Asking people to use bear boxes will only make a small impact on the situation. Is there not some basic preventative action that can be taken by the camper? Continue to push people to be responsible for their actions. Make them aware of the problem and provide strategies to avoid the problem.*
- *Boxes may attract garbage left by lazy campers*

Quetico, like all Ontario Parks uses a centralized reservation system to book permits. We had heard negative comments about the system from those with a problem but didn't know whether that was a consistent or only sporadic situation. So we asked several questions about the system. Of the people that commented on the reservation system the majority had no problems, a lot had no comment (which also suggests no problem) and virtually none had major problems. This was a more positive picture than we had anticipated. Perhaps because we were surveying the ones who got their permits they were more positive than those who didn't.



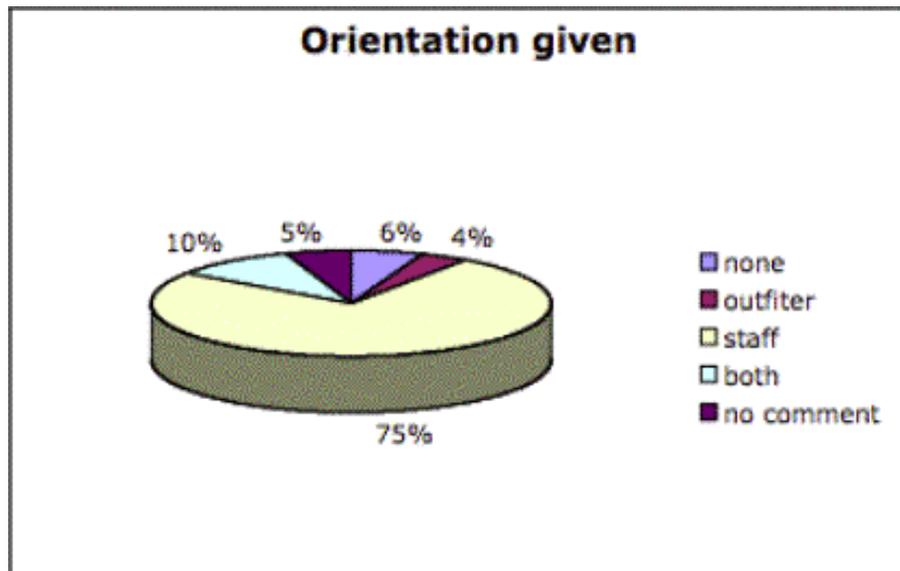
Almost all people that used it thought it was okay ...with most rating it good. A number of people confessed that they don't really know about the system as their outfitter had made the reservation. As well, we asked about a trip planning telephone line (807-597-2735) we use to help people who have more specific questions that cannot be answered by the centralized call centre. Unfortunately twice as many people said they didn't know about the service as did know. One frequent comment was that Quetico needs its own trip planning /information web site. They stated that the web was their most frequent tool to plan trips. Some had been to the Ontario Parks Web site but found it far too general for their needs and preferred to get Quetico information from private sites that had more detail. It was understandable that many of those least familiar with the reservation system or the information line were those who purchased outfitted trips.



Typical comments about the reservation/ information system are:

- *800 reservation system works OK.*
- *It's always hard to get the entry point and date I'd like but no way should you increase the number of permits.*
- *Reservation staff is helpful but I wasn't aware of trip planning number*
- *Can't find much info about Quetico on the web.*
- *The 800 service person was clueless and very difficult to work with. They don't seem to have any idea about the wilderness or Quetico, they might as well be selling concert tickets. Trip planning staff were very helpful though.*
- *I've been to Quetico 20 times. When we tried to get our own reservation the success rate was 50% but making it through an outfitter which costs me more money, the success rate was 90%. What gives? Do they get first crack at the permits?*

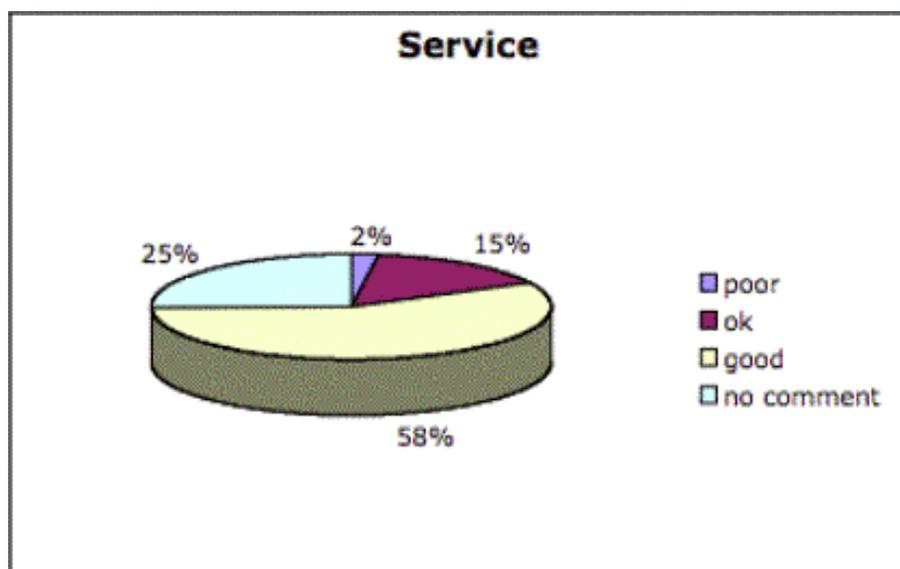
These previous questions told us about trip planning information but we also wanted to understand how people used and felt about the orientation they received just prior to heading into the park. We wanted to know if people understood park policies and regulations. Most felt that their primary orientation (75%) was from park staff. Ten percent cites orientation from staff and outfitters. A small number recalled only an outfitter orientation and of some concern 6% said they had received no orientation at all.



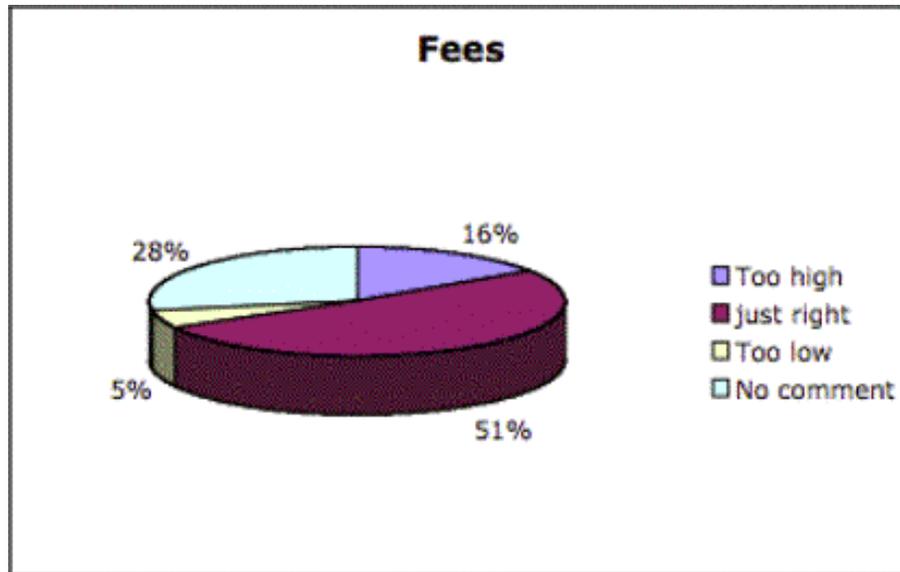
Consistently people were pleased with the orientations they received from park staff.

- *Talking with the rangers at the ranger stations is one of the main reasons my trips to Quetico have been so pleasurable.*
- *We look forward to visiting the ranger station as much as the actual camping trip.*
- *Although I've heard the orientation many times and think 'I know it all', I am surprised to always learn or be reminded of important park etiquette and current conditions.*

There was also positive response about the quality of all services provided by outfitters. Fifty-eight percent of customers saying they received good service, 15% moderate and only 2 % feeling that the service was inadequate.



When asking about park fees most (51%) felt they were just right or had no comment (28%) More felt that they were too high than too low although the ones that argued for them being too low seemed more certain of this. The fee question was somewhat clouded because many had trouble differentiating between the park fees and the outfitted package cost. In fact many of those who were outfitted had no idea what the park specific fees were.

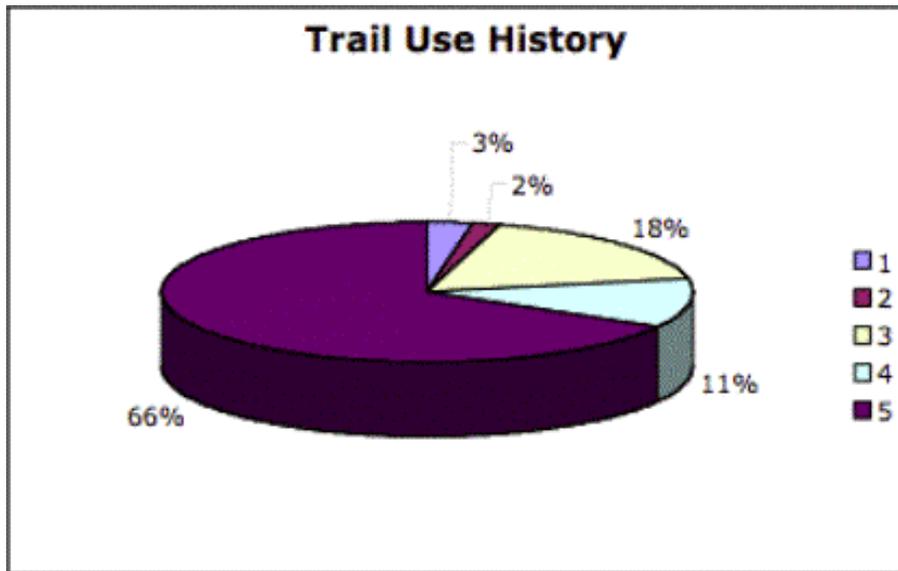


Comments on Fees Included:

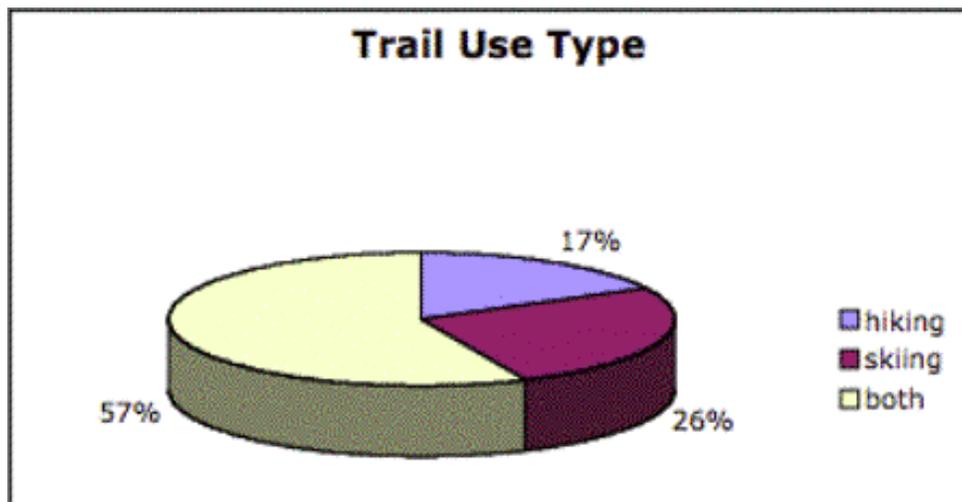
- *I would pay slightly higher park fees if the number of people were reduced.*
- *The fees should reflect the strength of the dollar. Americans are getting an incredible rate compared to Canadians.*

Our final set of questions was directed to nontraditional park use. That is, we wanted to understand how people felt about hiking in Quetico and cross-country skiing. Both of these are appropriate activities under the park plan but the overwhelming devotion to and tradition of canoeing overshadows all other use.

People were mildly positive about hiking and skiing in the park (66%). A common answer being, that while they would like to do it, they probably would not do so as they lacked the time to do more than their annual canoe trip. Eighteen percent thought that developing some hiking and skiing would be a good idea and 11% confirming that they would probably do it if they knew more or if appropriate trails were in place. Three percent of respondents thought that Quetico should be reserved for canoes.



Very few had ever done hiking or skiing in Quetico or even thought of it for that matter and wanted to know more. Generally, there was much more interest in skiing than hiking (perhaps because in hiking season they would rather canoe). To the extent there was concern about skiing it was mostly that it might somehow lead to snowmobile use. Likely if these questions were being asked of hikers and skiers there would be stronger interest than from such a devoted canoe cohort.



- *We enjoy XC skiing and may consider skiing Quetico even though it's a 3 hour drive for us.*
- *Would use hiking and ski trails if there was quality lodging nearby.*
- *I completely disagree with winter trail development. Winter camping is only for experienced people. Don't invite trouble. Keep it a summer park.*
- *I assume snowmobiles will never be allowed as part of your winter activity development.*
- *I have long considered winter camping in Quetico but believe it to be too difficult to access.*
- *I hope winter use doesn't have a negative ecological effect on the park or stress the winter wildlife.*
- *Please do not develop ski trails. Leave some areas untouched, if people don't want to go to that area, so be it. Leave it be.*
- *Excellent idea to develop cross-country ski trails.*

There were of course many other comments offered and concerns raised but none so frequent as to be worth trying to graph. Perhaps the most common sentiment that came up without any link to those questions asked in the survey concerned fishing. It was evident that a great many people loved to be in Quetico to fish. Typically though these people cherished the fishing experience they found as opposed to the volume of fish they caught. Many urge us to have fishing policies to strongly favour conservation. This didn't seem to have much to do with concern about over-fishing. Rather it seemed simply that the simple non-motorized experience that Quetico embodies should be extended to the water to keep Quetico a 'different' and 'special' place to simply revel in the joy of fishing. Sample comments include:

- Fishing is an important part of my Quetico experience. Every effort to promote good conservation is greatly appreciated. Thanks for being such good stewards for such a special place.
- Initiate barbless hooks and mandatory conservation fish licenses
- Every effort should be made to support good fishing conservation.

Conclusion:

So what now. This survey provides some insight into the values of the people who use Quetico. In an important way these people are as much a part of Quetico as are the trees and birds. They are part of its consciousness. As a Park Superintendent my job is to make management decisions in the long-term interest of the park and the public. Determining just what that interest is comes from plans, policies and surveys such as this one. Together they set short term and long term directions for park management..

In preparing the survey questions and in asking people to complete them I committed to provide a response. Part of that response is to circulate this summary. I suspect however that park users are hoping for more than that. They will want to know where the survey leads... what it implies...how is it used. There is of course no exact correlation between one survey and one course of action. Nevertheless, I feel bound to be clear about where this survey nudges me and nudges the park.

—We need to always remember how dedicated people are to Quetico and we should realize that much can be achieved by simply asking for help. I believe the most park users will gladly adhere to policies and plans that they believe are in the interest of the park. As an organization it is perhaps more important to simply be clear about those initiatives and their basis rather than needing to develop regulations.

—It seems we need to make an effort to improve the quality of many portages especially with a view to any environmental impact and safety concerns. That said, the overall primitive character of Quetico's portages needs to be maintained. This includes not marketing portage entrances. Linked to this we need to improve our maps, including reverting back to an earlier and much missed style of map.

—We need to continue to try and reduce the use of motors in the park, through working with the Lac La Croix First Nation on a gradual phase out of motorized guiding. As well we have to try and discourage aircraft traffic in and over the park.

—We need to make a stronger effort to inform some park users about the proper management of human waste and the disposal of garbage.

—We need to keep park quotas at present levels but try to find ways to distribute people from crowded areas. Possibly some tinkering with the allocation of quota can help as well as some encouragement of spring and fall use. Group travel size and group camping size seem to be a concern and we and outfitters should encourage groups to not travel in groups greater than nine.

—We should maintain and even enhance the orientation provided by entry station staff and recognize their value as the human face of Quetico. And we need to work together with outfitters to make sure that everyone receives an orientation to appropriate activity in a wilderness park,

—We should support a limited cross-country ski program in the north part of the park, away from well-used canoe areas. The character of that skiing should be mostly primitive and linked to winter camping. Exploration of any ski initiatives should be careful not to create any opportunity for increased public snowmobiling in the park.

—We need to more strongly promote the trip planning telephone number so that people needing more detail than can be provided through the central reservation service have a place to go. Linked to this we need to enhance the opportunity to get WEB-based information about the park.

—We need to explore how to best keep Quetico as an area of fishing within a strong conservation context which stresses the wilderness value of the fishing experience.

Thanks again to all who participated.
~ Robin Reilly, Quetico Park Superintendent

Paddle Back

Canoeing Quetico Park & the Boundary Waters
QuietJourney.com